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George gives to geology Jane: The name letter effect and incidental similarity cues in fundraising

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- *People tend to like others with attributes similar to their own (the similarity principle) and favor products with names similar to their own (the name letter effect).*
- *In the present field experiment, the name letter effect and similarity principle are tested in a phonaton among alumni of Utrecht University, The Netherlands. First name and surname initials, fields of education, and association memberships of alumni were matched to those of students soliciting contributions in the phonaton.*
- *Female alumni with first names and fields of study similar to those of solicitors were more likely to donate, as were male alumni with first names similar to the field of study of solicitors. Both male and female alumni with first names similar to the name of the university donated more often than those with dissimilar names.*
- *Name letter effects are a cheap and effective instrument to increase donations in fundraising campaigns conducted by telephone.*

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Introduction

People prefer to interact with others who are similar to themselves in terms of age, ethnic background, educational background, religion, and political orientation (McPherson *et al.*, 2001). Support for the “similarity-attraction hypothesis” (Byrne, 1971) has also been found in research on helping behavior (Cialdini and Trost, 1998). Similarity to another person leads people to like that person better than a dissimilar person.

Liking another person, in turn, increases compliance with requests from that person (Cialdini and Trost, 1998; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). Experiments with helping behavior have revealed that passers by are more inclined to help strangers and to comply with requests when they were asked by a person with characteristics (age, attire, and ethnicity) similar to their own (for a review, see Dovidio *et al.*, 2006).

A series of recent studies have documented the effects of similarity of a coincidental characteristic: one’s name. People have a preference for names similar to their own name and for letters in one’s own name. This phenomenon has been called the “name letter

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effect” and has been found in preferences for brand names, politicians, occupational careers, place of residence, relationship formation, and helping behavior (Pelham *et al.*, 2002; Jones *et al.*, 2002, 2004; Garner, 2005; Hodson and Olson, 2005).

The name letter effect seems to be the result not only of mere exposure or familiarity (Jones *et al.*, 2002; Garner, 2005), but also of “implicit egotism.” People like their own name because over a period time they have developed positive implicit associations with their name. Names may seem coincidental, but they are important for one’s sense of self (Pelham *et al.*, 2002). As a result, people are more strongly attracted to people with similar names and display more liking for a person with a similar name. Because similarity breeds liking, sharing a name with a person increases compliance with requests from that person (Burger *et al.*, 2004; Garner, 2005).

The female asks male effect

Another determinant of liking is physical attractiveness (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). People are more likely to comply with requests by physically attractive persons. In a door-to-door fundraising campaign, Landry, Lange *et al.* (2006) found that physically more attractive female solicitors raised more money, especially from males answering the door. This pattern was not found for the other cross-gender condition: more attractive male solicitors did not raise more money from females. As a result, female solicitors were more successful than male solicitors. This finding is not commonplace in the experimental literature on helping behavior; many other studies do not find a positive effect of female solicitors.

Does the female-asks-male effect hold in other contexts as well? Previous studies have not tested for cross-gender solicitor–donor effects in non-face-to-face contexts. Because a telephone conversation offers weak cues of physical attractiveness and does not offer easy opportunities for future interaction, gender of solicitor effects will be weaker than in a face-to-face context. However, studies on impression

formation in non-interactive contexts show that people do base impressions of others on their voices (Ko *et al.*, 2006; Surawski and Ossoff, 2006). Because even a brief telephone conversation provides cues that determine liking, solicitations for donations over the phone are likely to be affected by liking for the solicitor.

The present research

The aim of the present research was to explore the utility of the similarity breeds attraction principle for fundraising purposes. A field experiment was conducted in a phonaton among alumni of Utrecht University, The Netherlands. In the phonaton, students raised contributions to the University Fund.

As Hodson and Olson (2005) have argued, it is important to ascertain the boundary conditions of provocative principles like the name letter effect. The present research contributes to the identification of boundary conditions in two respects. First, the present study tested name letter and similarity effects in a non-face-to-face context where future interaction with the solicitor is unlikely. Most previous studies that found similarity effects on helping behavior involved situations in which the helper and the beneficiary had an opportunity for direct, face-to-face interaction, either during (Burger *et al.*, 2004) or after the experiment (Garner, 2005; Guègen *et al.*, 2005). If similarity breeds liking, it is not very remarkable that similarity increases the likelihood of helping another person that one physically meets. Similarity effects in situations that do not involve face-to-face contact like telephone conversations or communication through the Internet would be more remarkable. In two studies that have investigated similarity effects in non-face-to-face interaction situations (Garner, 2005; Guègen *et al.*, 2005), participants had received the (e-mail or telephone) address of the beneficiaries. This enables future interaction. In the present study, it was tested whether similarity effects occur when there is no face-to-face contact between solicitors and helpers and when there are no possibilities for future interaction.

A second difference between the present research and many past studies is that the present research focused on overt behavior that involved a real cost to the participants. The behavior studied in the present research involved a real sacrifice of own money for a collective good, not just preferences for letters or brand names (Hodson and Olson, 2005) or compliance with requests for small favors (Burger *et al.*, 2001).

The hypotheses tested below are the following. First, it is expected that similarity in the field of education between alumni and solicitors promotes giving (*field of study similarity effect*). Thus, geology alumni are expected to give more often to geology students soliciting contributions than to other solicitors. Second, it is expected that similarity in student association membership between alumni and solicitors promotes giving (*association similarity effect*): (former) members of the geology association are expected to give more often to current members of the geology association soliciting contributions than to other solicitors. Third, it is expected that similarity in name initials between alumni and solicitors promotes giving and that alumni with names similar to the university's name will donate more often than those with dissimilar names (*name letter effects*). Thus, it is expected that George is more likely to give to Gene or Jane than to Dwight or Richard; that George is more likely to give to a geology student than to a physics student; and that Una and Tom are more likely to give to Utrecht University than Bob and George. Fourth, based on the reasoning that telephone conversations also provide cues to form impressions of the attractiveness of others, it is also expected that females will be more successful in raising donations from males than from females (*female-asks-male-effect*). Thus, George is more likely to give to Jane than to Jim.

Methods

Design and participants

Participants in the experiment were 496 alumni of Utrecht University (56.3% male,

43.8% female) who were contacted in the phonaton. Names of the participants were selected from the database of the Alumni Office of Utrecht University in a three-step procedure. In a first step, those alumni who had never made a donation to the University Fund ("U-Fonds") in the past were removed from the database. In a second step, the number of matches between fields of study and association memberships of available student solicitors and alumni was maximized. In this step, first the fields of study and association memberships of the solicitors were identified. Then the alumni database was searched for alumni with matching fields of study and association memberships. Records of alumni who completed the same fields of study and who had been members of the same associations as the nine solicitors were selected first. This procedure yielded matches for 212 alumni in the database (43.9% of the sample), consisting of three groups. Group 1 ($n=100$, 20.2%) shared the field of study with the solicitor; Group 2 ($n=55$, 11.1%) shared association membership; Group 3 shared the field of study as well as association membership ($n=57$, 11.5%). In a third step, an additional group of 284 alumni (57.1% of the sample) were randomly drawn from the database to increase the number of participants in the study. After the experiment was conducted, similarity of first name initials and fields of study were ascertained from the database. Among all participants, 47 alumni (25 males and 22 females) shared a first name initial with a solicitor and 47 alumni (29 males and 17 females) shared a first name initial with a field of study of a solicitor.

Two weeks before the experiment, the participants received a mailing including a fundraising letter signed by the chairman of the University Fund calling for contributions in the campaign, and an issue of the alumni magazine that also gave attention to the fundraising campaign. Because this was the first phonaton of the University, alumni were informed in the letter of the possibility that they would be called in the phonaton. When called, the alumni were not informed

that they were taking part in an experiment. Nine students of Utrecht University (five males, four females) made calls to alumni from 19.30 to 21.30 p.m. on Monday March 20 to Thursday March 23 2006. One hundred and seventeen calls were made on Monday, 75 on Tuesday, 167 on Wednesday, 126 on Thursday, and for 12 calls the day was not registered.

The students solicited contributions to two special programs of the University Fund on the occasion of its 74th lustrum. The two programs were a mentor-mentee program, in which alumni mentor current students, and a DVD with highlights of the University's history, made by students of the Professional School of the Arts. Information about these programs was provided in the alumni magazine. Students read a brief summary of the information about the programs to alumni upon request.

The solicitors were instructed to use the same script in all phone calls to alumni. In all conditions, solicitors started the conversation with: "Good evening sir/madam [surname of alumnus], I am a student in [field of study of solicitor] of Utrecht University and my name is [solicitor's name]." Students who were members of a student association mentioned this after they mentioned their field of study. The solicitors did not actively try to develop a conversation about their field of education or student association. To increase the number of calls, solicitors were instructed not to engage in lengthy conversations with alumni on matters not directly related to the donation request. Solicitors were trained by Alumni Office staff and were not told which hypotheses would be tested in the experiment.

Measures

The dependent variables in the present study are whether or not an actual donation was made according to the Alumni Office's registration after 2 months (until end of May) after the phonaton; and how much was donated. Of the 174 alumni (35.1%) who pledged money, 153 actually made a donation within 2 months (30.8%). Donations ranged from €5 to €250;

the mean amount donated was €30. Data on the alumni's gender, field of education, student association membership, and first name initials were taken from the Alumni Office database. Phonetic similarity of the first name initials was coded as 1 if the initials were identical or may sound similar.¹

Analytical strategy

There were large differences between the solicitors in their effectiveness. The least effective solicitor convinced only 16.7% of all alumni called to actually make a donation, while the most effective solicitor convinced 34.9% of the alumni called. Because the experimental conditions were unequally distributed over individual solicitors ($\chi^2 = 384.542$, $df = 24$, $p < 0.000$) as well as over female and male solicitors ($\chi^2 = 27.644$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.000$), any potential effects of similarity and the females asking males may be biased. Specifically, the female-asks-male effect may emerge because female solicitors had different fields of study than male solicitors, or females and males were not equally likely to call members of student associations ($\chi^2 = 67.958$, $df = 8$; $p < 0.000$ for individual solicitors and 11.883, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$ for female and male solicitors combined).

To take solicitor effects into account, logistic regression analyses of pledges and donations were conducted, including fixed effects for solicitors (Greene, 2003). The fixed effects specification can be thought of as an ordinary regression model including a series of dummy variables for each solicitor. The regression parameters can be interpreted as average within-solicitor effects. Also, dummy variables

¹In the Dutch language different letters may be pronounced with the same sound, depending on the following one or two letters. Because the full names of a substantial number of alumni were not available but only their initials, initials that may sound similar were coded as phonetically similar. Thus, "c" initials of alumni were coded as being similar not only to initials "c" of solicitors, but also as similar to "s" and "k," because "c" may be pronounced as [s] or [k]. Likewise, initials "q," "k" and "c" were coded as similar to each other because they are all pronounced as [k].

were included for the day of the call because on the number of calls made by male and female solicitors differed by day ($\chi^2 = 28.299$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.000$).

Results

The experiment revealed four significant similarity effects: (1) female alumni were more likely to donate money in response to solicitations from students with the same first name initial; (2) female alumni were more likely to donate when called by students with the same field of study; (3) male alumni were more likely to donate when called by students with a field of study similar to their own first name; (4) both female and male alumni with first name initials similar to the name of the university were more likely to donate.

In bivariate cross-tabulations, female alumni were more likely to donate money in response to solicitations from students with the same

first name initial ($\chi^2 = 5.347$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.021$, two-tailed; all χ^2 -statistics are based on a two-tailed test, with one degree of freedom, unless noted otherwise). Among the 22 female alumni with first name initials similar to that of solicitors, 40.9% donated money; among the 195 female alumni with dissimilar initials, only 19.5% donated money. The odds ratio for the relationship between first name initial similarity and donation among females is 2.86. In the fixed effect regression, the effect of first name initial similarity is even stronger (odds ratio of 4.19; see column 1 of **Table 1**). Males, however, were not affected by similarity of first names ($\chi^2 = 0.159$, $p < 0.690$). As a result, the effect of first name initial similarity was marginally significant ($p < 0.089$) in the total sample.

Males donated more often when solicited by a student with a first name similar to the first letter of their own field of study ($\chi^2 = 3.839$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.050$). Among the 17 male alumni

Table 1. Conditional fixed effects logistic regression of pledges and donations ($n = 494$)

	Females		Males		All	
	OR	<i>p</i>	OR	<i>p</i>	OR	<i>p</i>
Social sciences ^a	2.97		1.69		1.63	
Biology, medicine ^a	0.98		2.58		1.90	
Pharmacy, chemistry ^a	2.50		1.59		1.78	
Humanities ^a	1.24		1.14		1.07	
Geography	0.41		1.24		0.99	
Law/economics ^a	2.40		1.72		1.83	
Psychology ^a	2.11		1.70		1.64	
Female					0.64	(*)
Female asks male					1.29	
Member of association	3.63	*	2.97	*	3.30	***
Similarity association	0.47		0.59		0.50	
Similarity field of study	3.02	(*)	1.36		1.70	
Similarity first name	4.19	**	0.96		1.83	(*)
Similarity first name/study solicitor	0.63		3.10	*	2.07	
Similarity first name/university	6.18	(*)	7.83	**	6.94	***
Tuesday call ^b	2.64		0.69		1.07	
Wednesday call ^b	0.49		0.74		0.62	
Thursday call ^b	0.44		0.27	*	0.32	**
Log likelihood (df)	-83.653 (16)	(*)	-138.383 (16)	*	-242.808 (18)	***

^aReference category: physics/field unknown. ^bReference category: Monday call/day unknown. OR, odds ratio. $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

called by solicitors with first name initials similar to the fields of study of the alumni, 52.9% donated money; among the 262 alumni with dissimilar names and fields of study, only 30.2% donated money. The odds ratio for this cross-table is 2.60. In the fixed effects logistic regression, the odds ratio is even somewhat stronger (3.10). Females did not respond more favorably to solicitors with a first name similar to the first letter of their own field of study ($\chi^2 = 0.411$, $p < 0.522$). As a result, in the total sample the effect was not significant ($p < 0.111$).

A sizeable effect of name similarity to the university emerged in a bivariate cross-table. Among the 18 students with first name initials "u" or "t," 12 donated money (66.7%); among the 478 students with other first name initials, only 123 donated money (25.7%). The χ^2 -statistic is strongly significant (14.673, $p < 0.000$); the odds ratio is 5.77. In the fixed effects regression, the effect is even stronger (odds ratio of 7.13, $p < 0.000$, in the total sample).

A cross-tabulation of gender of solicitors and alumni did not reveal a female-asks-male effect. Also, the effect was not significant ($p < 0.280$) in the fixed effects regression. The cross-tables showed that males were somewhat more likely to donate when solicited by females (34.1%) than when solicited by males (30.6%), but this difference was not significant ($\chi^2 = 0.330$, $p < 0.566$). Among females, the reverse pattern was found. When female alumni were solicited by males, 24.1% donated money, while only 18.8% did so when solicited by females. However, also this difference was not significant ($\chi^2 = 0.903$, $p < 0.342$). On average, males were more likely to donate money than females (31.5% vs. 21.7%; $\chi^2 = 6.017$, $p < 0.014$).

In bivariate cross-tabulations, no significant association was found between field of study and student association membership of alumni and solicitors (all $\chi^2 < 1.108$, $p < 0.292$). However, removing systematic solicitor effects and controlling the day on which the call was made (see Table 1), a marginally significant effect of similarity of study among female alumni emerges (odds ratio of 3.02, $p < 0.084$).

The analysis does provide some other noteworthy findings. Membership in a student association is a strong predictor of donations. Alumni who are or were members of student associations (fraternities, sororities, or associations within one's field of study) are more likely to respond favorably to the request made by the solicitors. This finding is in line with other research on alumni giving in the USA (Marr *et al.*, 2005) and is probably the result of stronger social bonds to the university. Controlling for association membership, the effect of gender on the overall likelihood of giving diminishes. This suggests that the reason why males were more likely to donate is that they are more likely to be (former) members of student associations. Finally, differences between fields of study are not significant.

In additional analyses of the amount contributed among donors, none of the variables in the analysis had a significant effect on the amount donated (results available from author).

Conclusion and discussion

The present experiment reveals three name letter effects. Female alumni were more likely to donate money when solicited by a student with a phonetically similar first name initial; male alumni were more likely to donate when called by students with a field of study similar to their own first name; and both males and females were more likely to give when their first name was similar to the name of the university. The experiment also identifies two boundary conditions for name letter effects. Name similarity did not increase the amount donated and there were no effects of surname initials. In addition to the name letter effects, one other "similarity breeds liking" effect was observed: female alumni were more likely to donate when called by students with the same field of study. Similarity of association membership did not increase giving, however. Neither was a female-asks-male effect observed in an unbiased test.

The significant and sometimes sizeable name letter effects are remarkable because

they appear in a context that did not allow for face-to-face interaction, with very limited chance of future interaction, and the behavior studied involved a real cost of money to the participants. Thus, the present study strengthens the case for name letter and similarity effects: similarity promotes more than compliance with requests for small favors (Burger *et al.*, 2001). The results are in line with a recent study showing name letter effects on disaster donations to hurricane relief (Chandler, Griffin and Sorensen, 2008).

Why was no effect observed of association similarity? It is possible that this is due to the inexperience of solicitors in the present experiment. Solicitors were students who worked as charity solicitors for the first time after a brief training session, and were instructed not to engage in lengthy conversations with alumni about their field of study or student association life. After the experiment, several solicitors reported that they found it awkward to disclose association membership in the introduction of the phone calls. It is very well possible that experienced solicitors will produce similarity effects. Training solicitors more extensively may produce not only a higher level of effectiveness, but also the hypothesized similarity effects. In addition, it is also possible that more than a superficial announcement of the field of study and association membership will produce stronger similarity effects.

The absence of a female-asks-male effect may be explained from the fact that there were no opportunities for future interaction. Males, may be, are more likely to respond to female solicitors in a door-to-door campaign as in the study by Lange *et al.* (2006) when there is an opportunity for future interaction. While in the telephone conversations in the present experiment males may have felt attracted to female solicitors, the absence of an opportunity for future interaction may have reduced the behavioral effects of this increased level of liking.

The lack of effects of surname initials and the lack of effects on the amount donated are two important boundary conditions. Many previous field experiments with charitable

behavior have found effects on the incidence of donations, but not the amount donated (*e.g.*, Landry *et al.*, 2006; Reingen, 1978). For many types of charitable contributions, there are socially accepted standard amounts that one should contribute, and the decision whether or not to contribute is the most important one. The lack of surname similarity effects is a second boundary condition. Previous studies have mostly focused (and documented) effects of first name similarity (*e.g.*, Pelham *et al.*, 2002; Hodson and Olson, 2005). Assuming that first names are more important to people than surnames, the fact that no surname similarity effects were observed in the present research is in line with the implicit egotism hypothesis. This hypothesis should be tested systematically in future research.

Another issue for future research is the gender difference in similarity effects. Similarity of first name and field of study promoted donations by females, but not by males, and similarity of first name with field of study of the solicitor promoted donations by males, but not by females. It is unclear where these differences come from. Further research is clearly needed here.

Finally, a boundary condition that may be important but was not tested in the present study is the level of involvement with the cause. In the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of consumer behavior (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), highly involved consumers are supposed to pay more attention to the basic message of an advertisement. Less involved consumers, on the other hand, are supposed to respond more strongly to incidental characteristics. This hypothesis has been supported in earlier studies of fundraising materials (Diamond and Gooding-Williams, 2002; Bekkers and Crutzen, 2007). From this framework follows the hypothesis that highly involved donors are less susceptible to name letter effects than less involved donors. One would expect that regular donors are less strongly affected than incidental donors. Sharing a student association membership with a solicitor may be more than an incidental similarity: it brings memories one's involvement with the University to

the surface, enhancing the salience of the involvement. Thus, one would expect that association membership similarity cues have similar effects among donors with different levels of involvement. Another testable hypothesis from the ELM concerns differences between types of donations reflecting high and low engagement levels. The present study concerned an incidental campaign aimed at a specific project, a relatively low engagement decision. It is questionable whether name letter effects would also emerge in planned giving using the procedure tested in the present experiment.

Despite the need for clarification of gender differences in similarity effects, the implication of the findings of this study for fundraising professionals is clear: it is worth while experimenting with similarity cues. Obviously, fundraising organizations cannot change their donors' names. But they can tailor solicitations such that the likelihood of similarities between solicitors and donors is maximized. In the present study, female alumni who were solicited for contributions to their alma mater by a student with the same first name initial were more than two times more likely to donate than females who were solicited by a student with a different first name initial. Matching initials of potential donors with those of solicitors such that George solicits contributions from Jane while Bob solicits contributions from Bill is a relatively easy way to double the amount raised in fundraising campaigns.

Another relatively easy way to increase donations using positive implicit associations is to identify current donors with common names in fundraising communications, so that many donors feel similar to other donors. Groups of donors with different initials could even be targeted with materials including exemplars with matching initials. Also, it would be strategic to name special events or campaigns such that the number of donors that will have positive implicit associations with these events and campaigns is maximized.

Still other strategies for non-profit marketers based on implicit positive associations could

focus on targeting occupational groups or inhabitants of areas with names similar to the organization's name. If the findings of Jones, Pelham, and colleagues hold, the Heart Association should be more successful in places like Hillsdale and in the occupational group of hardware store owners because these places and groups contain more people called Harry and Hillary than places like Louisdale and groups of liquor store owners.

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Biographical notes

René Bekkers is an Assistant Professor and Head of Research at the Department of Philanthropic Studies, VU University Amsterdam. He studies causes and consequences of philanthropy and volunteering in longitudinal analyses of panel survey and experimental data.

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